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Controlling the Work-Life Balance? A Case of Football Non-Participation in Australia

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to report and analyse research findings on the relationship between organised team sport and the impediments to participating in it, particularly those related to working time. To date there has been limited study of the relationship between organised team sport participation and impediments to it, particularly working time arrangements, within the work-life balance debate - especially at a regional level. Our methodology involves a survey of and semi-structured interviews with participants. We find that the main impediments to participation in local soccer are injury/illness, work and family commitments. Impediments to match participation are dominated by injury/illness, however, work commitments are the principal impediment to training sessions. Our results imply that, in the regional Australian context, impediments to participation are limited but can be mitigated by the increasing flexibility of work requirements which would permit increased participation at training sessions.

Keywords – Working time, Sport participation, Regional Australia.

Paper type – Research paper.

Introduction

The research reported in this paper endeavours to identify and analyse the reasons that impede the participation of people in organised team sport in regional Australia. The rationale for organised team sport rests on the proposition that sport is a collective activity that brings people to a focal point of interaction which builds or assists in building social relations between people in a community, usually on a voluntary basis. For this to occur there must be a synchronisation of time when sport is played and people have the available time to engage in it. Research to date, including statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) suggests a number of possible reasons for the level of participation - lack of interest, the cost of playing sport, injury and work and family commitments (ABS 2007). One prominent cause is working time patterns.

Participation in Sport

The role of sport in contemporary society has received increasing attention from researchers and governments. The list of advantages in participating in organised team sport include an improved level of health and fitness, the development of interest among young people, the provision of facilities for unorganised physical activity, an identification with and attachment as a member of a community through a representative team in wider competitions and the economic benefits, particularly the employment of people in promoting, sponsoring, developing and organising sport. These are presumably some of the reasons for government financial support for team sport from national to local level.

There has been a growing interest in the role of sport in society, particularly the development of a sociology of sport (e.g. Washington and Karen 2001), the health and social benefits (e.g. Marsh 1993; Green, Smith and Roberts 2005; Fogelman, Bloch and Kahan 2004) and the significance of sport as an enhancer of social capital (e.g. Heuser's 2005 study of female lawn bowlers in Perth). There are also costs and problems such as social exclusion and decline of sport participation (e.g. Dempsey's 1990 study of women in an Australian rural community; Tonts and Atherly's 2005 rural Australian case study of the vulnerability of sporting clubs).

At present, it is not possible to clearly identify trends in sport and physical recreation in Australia and some other countries (Collins 2007). However, some survey research suggests that overall participation in exercise recreation and sport in Australia increased from 2001 to 2004 and then declined to 2006 (Australian Sports Commission Annual Report 2006). With more certainty, the ABS identifies the main forms of sport and exercise, placing football (known as soccer in Australia to avoid confusion with rugby (union and league) and the home grown code Australian Rules colloquially known as AFL) in the top ten (ABS 2002 and 2007) and, apart from netball, the only organised 'team' sport in the top ten (2005-6). Some international research suggests that participation rates in Canada,

Australia and the UK are static despite improvements in facilities and efforts to promote participation (Collins 2007). The most extensive evidence is from surveys conducted by the ABS (2002) for sport and physical activity. However, because of changes to the surveys (e.g. including additional physical activities and varying the base age of adults from 15 to 18) the ABS cautions against making comparisons over time. A major problem in conducting research in this area is lack of reliable and consistent data which does not allow us to draw any definite conclusion as to the trend of participation in organised team sport in Australia. It is not clear if participation is increasing or decreasing.

There are some important conceptual questions which arise when participation and the potential determinants of it are disaggregated. First, the distinction between organised and non-organised sport has become a feature of recent data collection by the ABS. In part, it is assumed that organised sport lives within the institutional boundaries of sporting teams, clubs and associations. Non-organised sport is assumed to live outside this institutional framework and is essentially 'social' in nature. However, this distinction is blurred by the notion of club membership. Some clubs organise social sport in addition to competitive sport.

Second, there is a distinction between team and individual sport which influences participation rates; participation rates are higher for individual sports than for team sports (ABS 2007). Again, this conceptual distinction is blurred by the participation in interclub competitions, albeit in small teams, (e.g. tennis, golf, swimming, lawn bowls). Nevertheless, this is an important distinction because it is reasonable to assume that team sport has a higher potential for the identified and alleged social and community benefits in the literature than individual sport.

Third, there are realised and potential benefits and costs. The former include health benefits (e.g. lower levels of obesity and heart disease), social capital and economic development (e.g. through the purchase of sporting equipment, the building and operation of facilities and attendance at sporting events). Costs include injury, exclusion of some groups, income and spectator conflict.

Finally, there is a commercial and non-commercial distinction. Some sports with relatively high participation rates appear to be mainly associated with individual involvement for which payment is made. In this sense, even club membership by the individual is in the form of a commercial transaction with a service being purchased but with no responsibility outside the transaction, nor formal nor normative obligation as to voluntary contribution by members) (e.g. commercial gyms).

While organised team sport has some benefits which individual sport does not, both have costs and benefits. The distinction between the two is not unambiguous.

Work and Participation in Sports: Observations and Theoretical Considerations

Since the early 1980s in Australia the standard working time model of a 40 hour, 9 am to 5 pm, Monday to Friday working week has been gradually reduced so as to make working time arrangements more diverse and flexible. While the model included casual employment, 'reasonable overtime', shiftwork, night, weekend and public holiday work, they were exceptions to the model. The proportion of people working 'standard' hours has been decreasing since the early 1980s (Campbell, 2002; Watson, et. al. 2003, pp. 84-92). At present, almost half the labour force work under arrangements which are different from the model, including casual, part-time and contract employment, different roster systems (e.g. 12 hour shifts over 3 days) and working hours which incorporate night and/or weekend work as frequent, if not regular, elements of a working week (e.g. Heiler 1998).

The significance of this change in working time patterns has meant that an increasing proportion of the labour force is working at a time when other people are not working. Some aspects of non-working life such as time allocated to community service and activities, family and participation in organised team sport are theoretically affected by the move away from the standard working time model towards a more diverse model. The problems associated with this increased lack of working – non-working time synchronisation and the development of policy have become prominent in relation to the issue of 'work-family/life balance' (e.g. using some forms of leave to attend to family member care and flextime systems). The problems and costs associated with not aligning work and non-work time are increasingly seen as a matter of concern (see Pocock 2005; Eikhof et.al. 2007).

In 2005, the Australian Federal Government through the Workplace Relations (Work Choices) Amendment Act (2005), enacted changes which permitted increased scope for more flexible working time arrangements to be negotiated between employers and employees, thus moving further away from the standardised model.

Thus, in recent years the principal changes have been:

- an increase in the percentage of the labour force employed a casuals
- the spread of work to Sundays
- the increase of opening times which provide services, particularly late night and weekend shopping
- the move away from standardised industry award conditions to individual workplace agreements.

The question of available non-working time emerges as an important factor in social participation in various aspects of life including social costs (e.g. Dawkins and Simpson 1994; employee control of working time by Berg, et. al. 2004; part-time work in Britain by Warren 2004 and Jacobs and Gerson's 2001 study of work-family balance in the United States). Some studies have examined the link between working time and the frequency of leisure participation (e. g. Barber's 2004 analysis of the application of the ILO Convention No. 156 on workers with family responsibilities and the Australian industrial relations legislation of 1993 and 1996 which indicates a trade-off between work and leisure within families). More particularly, Bittman's 2002 analysis of Time Use Survey data suggests that participation in leisure activities is '...most powerfully determined by hours of employment, family responsibilities and gender...'

One problem with existing studies is the generalised nature of specifying causal factors. While some studies do not place emphasis on working time as a causal factor in participation in sport and physical activity in general (e.g. Stratton, et. al, 2005), others do not isolate working time as a distinct causal factor but tend to amalgamate it with related factors (e.g. work and study (Dassanayaka, et. al, 2002)). For present purposes, the literature exhibits an inconclusive approach to working time as a factor. For example, the Australian study by Stratton, et. al, (2005) excludes it from further analysis after initial testing, although it includes occupation as a variable which has an influence on working time. By contrast the ABS (2006) lists 'Not enough time' as the most significant factor in determining non-participation in sport and physical activity but causes of this are not identified. The subsequent study (ABS (2007) combines 'insufficient time due to study/work'. In this study of football participation, they are separated.

The most recent findings (ABS 2007) indicate the most significant impediment to participation by non-participants and low level participants is 'insufficient time due to work/study', particularly for males, followed by lack of interest, age, 'ongoing injury/illness' and 'insufficient time due to family', particularly for females.

Football in Bathurst

According to Bathurst District Soccer Inc. (BDS) Registrar's Report, in 2007 there were approximately 1,448 registered football players in 103 teams from 12 clubs. The total male/female ratio was approximately 2:1, however, in senior grades it was approximately 6:4. The table below suggests a gradual rise over a number of years with a decline for the most recent year - particularly in some mid-teen years (under 13s and under 15s).

Table 1: Bathurst District Soccer Players 2004-7

Year	Junior Total	Senior Female	Senior Male	Senior Total	Total Players
2004	535	343	505	848	1383
2005	559	301	549	850	1409
2006	646	371	529	900	1546
2007	643	Not avail.	Not avail.	805	1448

Source: Bathurst District Soccer Inc. Registrar's Report 2007

Research Methodology

The study, conducted towards the end of the 2007 soccer season in Bathurst (July-August 2007), was based on a questionnaire survey of junior (16 years and below) and senior players. We received 337 completed usable questionnaires (95 from junior players and 142 from senior players), a response rate of 16.4% of the total number of registered players. The response rate was highest from female senior players (about 25.9%) and lowest from male senior players (about 12.3%). In addition, 26 face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected senior players, coaches and other officials: 11 players, 4 coaches, 1 manager, 7 player/coaches and 3 BDS officials.

Research Findings

Participation consists of both training and playing and we considered the most likely impediments to either. In considering the issue of work-life balance we confined our analysis to the responses of senior players (more than 16 years of age) who are most likely to be in the labour force. Almost all juniors (96%) were full-time students.

Table 2 Age-Gender Distribution of Senior Players

Age group	Male	Female	Male:Female ratio
16 – 17 years	14	39	36:64
18 – 20 years	9	10	47:53
21 – 25 years	7	13	35:65
26 – 30 years	6	5	55:45
31 – 35 years	4	3	57:43
36 – 40 years	10	6	62:38
41 years & above	10	6	62:38
All players	60	82	42:58

As evident from Table 2, more than half of the respondents were less than 20 years old. The proportion of female players was higher in younger age groups and significantly lower in older age groups by comparison with male players. In terms of employment status, 36.6% were employed fulltime, 16.2 % were casuals and 26.8% were unemployed (probably reflecting full-time school) (Table 3).

Approximately 17% were parents with young or teenage children and 18% cared for elderly or sick relatives at home (i.e. family commitments).

Table 3: Employment Status of Senior Respondents

Employment status	Number of Players	% of total
Full time employed	52	36.6
Permanent part-time	8	5.6
Casual	23	16.2
Self-employed	6	4.2
Unemployed	38	26.8
No response	15	10.6
Total	142	100.0

Several factors were responsible for the low rate of participation in training sessions. The main reason for missing training sessions was work. Inflexible work schedules, work pressure, threat of loosing jobs were among the major work commitment issues cited during interviews. Family commitments and injury or illness were the other major reasons (Table 4).

Table 4: Major Reasons for Missing Training Sessions & Matches (Seniors)

Reason	Training Ranked as No. 1	Training % of total No. 1 ranking	Matches Ranked as No. 1	Matches % of total No. 1 ranking
Work commitments	36	22.6	19	12.2
Family commitments	34	21.4	19	12.2
Injury or illness	31	19.6	40	25.6
Transport problems	9	5.7	15	9.7
On holidays	8	5.0	12	7.7
Lack of interest	8	5.0	8	5.1
Busy with studies	7	4.5	7	4.5
Busy with other activities	6	3.7	7	4.5
High cost	5	3.1	6	3.8
Busy with shopping	4	2.5	6	3.8
Clash with other sports	3	1.9	5	3.2
Other reasons	8	5.0	12	7.7
All reasons*	159	100.0	156	100.0

*Total responses are more than the number of respondents in some cases as a few respondents assigned the same rank to more than one reason.

In terms of missing training sessions, female players cited family commitments or illness or injury as the most significant reasons whereas male players cited work commitments (Table 5). Work commitments affected both genders almost

uniformly, indicating little advantage or disadvantage as a result of working time arrangements. Full-time employed players were more affected by work commitments than were casuals. A large proportion of players, particularly the young, worked in casual positions in the retail sector and possibly faced more inflexible conditions. Family commitments were a more significant impediment for women than men and for full-time employed than part-time and casual employed. They were also more evenly distributed across the age groups but highest amongst the youngest group. Injury or illness was the major impediment for the youngest players as compared to other age groups.

Table 5: Major Reasons for Missing Training by Gender, Employment Status and Age (Seniors)

	Work Commitment		Family Commitment		Injury or Illness	
	Ranked as No.1	Ranked as No.2	Ranked as No.1	Ranked as No.2	Ranked as No.1	Ranked as No.2
Gender						
Male	19	9	14	9	8	12
Female	17	8	22	8	23	28
Employment status						
Full-time employed	24	5	16	9	7	17
Part-time/Casual	9	7	5	2	11	10
Unemployed	3	2	11	1	9	9
No response	-	3	6	5	4	4
Age groups						
Below 20 years	14	8	14	3	22	20
21-30 years	13	4	8	2	4	9
31-40 years	5	2	8	4	1	6
Above 40 years	4	2	4	3	4	5
No response	-	1	2	5	-	-

In general, players from all groups missed a significantly lower proportion of matches as compared to training sessions (Table 6). Only a very small proportion of players missed all matches and this was mainly due to long-term injury. Although the same three factors were involved, the relative importance of injury or illness was significantly higher.

As in the case of training sessions, female players experienced much more difficulty in relation to injury or illness and family commitments compared to males. Significantly, a higher proportion of younger players, mainly women, than older players, cited injury or illness as the most important reason. In general, injury or illness dominated all age and all employment status groups.

Table 6: Major Reasons for Missing Matches by Gender, Employment Status and Age (Seniors)

	Injury or illness		Family Commitments		Work Commitments	
	Ranked as No.1	Ranked as No.2	Ranked as No.1	Ranked as No.2	Ranked as No.1	Ranked as No.2
Gender						
Male	10	3	8	4	9	5
Female	30	3	11	7	10	1
Employment status						
Full-time employed	14	5	8	6	9	2
Part-time/Casual	12	-	5	2	6	2
Unemployed	12	1	6	3	4	2
No response	2	-	-	-	-	-
Age groups						
Below 20 years	25	1	7	5	8	4
21-30 years	6	2	6	2	5	2
31-40 years	5	1	4	3	1	-
Above 40 years	4	2	2	1	5	-
No response	-	-	-	-	-	-

Analysis

The main reasons for missing training are work commitments (22.6%); family commitments (21.4%) and illness or injury (19.6%). The main reasons for missing matches are illness or injury (25.6%) family commitments (12.2%) and work commitments (12.2%). There is also a noticeable difference between ‘never missing’ training (32.4%) as opposed to ‘never missing’ a match (67.3%). The explanation is that work commitments are a significant impediment on weeknights (training nights), but less so on weekends (game days).

The most cited impediment to participation is illness or injury for all groups. This is at odds with the ABS (2007) findings for individual and team sports combined where this factor ranked lower. This suggests that team participants have a stronger sense of responsibility towards a team playing in a competition as opposed to participation in an individual sport and are inclined to play unless they are physically unable rather than let their team down. The results indicate that illness or injury is a much greater impediment for women than for men and for people under twenty years of age.

Family commitments are a significant impediment to training, particularly for women. This is consistent with the discrepancy between male and female family commitments for non-participation and low participation (ABS 2007) and the conclusion of Pocock (2005) and Eikhof, et. al. (2007) that women continue to

have a disproportionate caring role. Approximately half of all respondents who stated that family commitments impeded participation in training were employed full-time and approximately 42% of those who stated that these impeded participation in matches were employed full-time. In general, family commitments were reported to be at about the same level as work commitments. That work and family commitments are at similar levels for training sessions and matches suggest that both compete with football for available time and probably prevail over football because they are largely involuntary whereas participation is largely voluntary. It may also be the case, that work and family commitments themselves constitute a trade-off as the literature indicates.

Work commitments are one of the three most important impediments, particularly in terms of participating in training. The group most affected by this is full-time workers. The structure of industry in the region is such that there is a diversity of industries within the three sectors (agriculture, manufacturing and services) which is more evenly divided than is the case in a large (capital) city because the surrounding region has a high level of farm employment. Manufacturing, transport and storage and education are relatively large employers and although some operate shift systems, there is more scope for involuntary work during nights (particularly overtime) than on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. In addition, the Bathurst retail industry is characterised by many small businesses which tend to close on weekend afternoons unless they are in a retail shopping complex. However, the large store part of the retail industry with a significant proportion of employment is affected by weekend work. Taken together, the structure of industry is a precondition for structuring working time, usually on the basis of established trading practice and utilisation of technology.

However, there is also an established pattern of employment conditions which enable greater flexibility through established employment relations which may not be so prevalent in large regional and capital city workplaces particularly to the extent that labour turnover rates are higher. This indicates a propensity by employers and workers and unions which represent them to seek working time during the week rather than on weekends. The community has established and valued sporting traditions which tend to be supported by relations at workplaces.

One of the objectives of this research was to assess the impact of recent changes in the industrial relations system, particularly working time arrangements, on sport participation. In terms of changes in these arrangements, only 19% of the respondents (28 players) answered positively and more than half of them were employed full-time (Table 7). One-third of full-time employed players who responded to this question said that changes in workplace conditions did affect their participation.

Table 7: Did changes in working hours affect your participation rate?

Response	Number of players	% of total
Yes	28	19.7
No	79	55.6
Uncertain	35	24.7
Total	142	100.0

Most of the interviewees said that working time arrangements had not become worse in recent years and that the problem had always been a common one in Bathurst. The relatively small and less diversified nature of the regional labour market seemed to influence when people were obliged to work. In particular, a shortage of skills in specific areas did not allow replacement of particular people on particular days. Several interviewees mentioned that they would try to avoid training sessions rather than matches. Part-time and casual workers sometimes found it difficult to adjust work times to attend training and/or matches as they were called to work at short notice. This happened particularly for retail industry workers and often on weekends.

Opportunities to socialise were an important reason for participation in football in Bathurst. A large majority of interviewed players, particularly in older age groups, stated that the main motivation for them was meeting friends on match days, particularly by players in older age groups. It was observed that most of the players spend a significant amount of time after their matches socialising. This community aspect appeared to be one of the major motivations for players to continue playing the game for long periods of time. Indeed, friends within a team appeared to be an important factor. Several interviewees pointed out that they liked to play in teams with friends and often changed teams together in order to play together. A more competitive spirit to the game seemed to be more prominent among younger players and those in top level teams.

Few surveyed players considered quitting the game. The main reasons were injury or illness and family responsibilities. Increasing work commitments were not considered by many as an important factor. Tonts (2005, pp. 146-7) discusses 'a so-called darker side' to sport which involves social, economic and cultural methods of excluding some people. Lenskyj (1988) argues that a gender 'approach to sport' may alienate some women. We encountered some evidence of this social cost. A small number of interviewees mentioned attitudes of coaches, and referees and officials to a lesser extent as an important factor in their loss of interest in the game.

Conclusion

In this regional Australian study, impediments to participation in soccer are mainly illness and injury, work and family commitments and a social value placed

on matches. To the extent that work-life balance is affected by the distribution of time, some decisions are beyond the control of players and others involved in the sport (illness or injury) whereas others may be constituted as a trade-off (football participation and family time). There is a significant difference between participation in training as opposed to matches with higher participation at matches than training sessions. This suggests that night work, as opposed to weekend work, is significant in affecting training participation but not match participation.

While the move away from a standardised working time model is evident in Australia and provides a *prima facie* explanation for increased pressure on a voluntary work-life balance, in general terms, the findings here indicate that factors specific to a city and surrounding region, including industry structure and culture and the sport of football, result in a particular pattern of sport participation. They suggest that the extent and form of the working time-life time trade-off cannot be assumed but rather that the specific factors identified mean that there is likely to be a diversity of work-life balance. That the distinction between participation rates at matches is significantly above that of training is important because it suggests a mix of voluntary and involuntary decisions about the use of time, in particular that when workers become football players they do so in a form, namely matches as opposed to training sessions, which is of the highest value to them. While the point by Eikhof, et. al. (2007) about a search for a more 'nuanced' treatment of work-life balance is accepted, particularly that there may be a trade-off between valued work and valued non-work and not that work is always to be viewed as an involuntary time cost, the findings here suggest factors other than work commitments significantly influence the distribution of time.

In general, the main impediment to participation is illness or injury, particularly for women and younger age groups. Family commitments are seen as an impediment particularly for women in terms of training but also for full-time workers. Paradoxically, there is a balance between work commitments and family commitments but it is in terms of a cost to participation in the sport.

The findings lead to the conclusion that there are significant demands on people's time which, illness or injury aside, make it difficult for them to participate in training, in particular, on a regular basis. The findings here suggest that there is more flexibility on weekends to redistribute time. It is clear that some of the main reasons, particularly illness or injury and family commitments are difficult if not impossible to rearrange in ways which would enable higher levels of participation. In other cases, there is a greater degree of choice but the costs would appear to be relatively high to families and individuals (e.g. forsaking holidays). However, other reasons, particularly working time arrangements do have greater scope to be

changed so that people can participate at higher levels than at present, particularly in training.

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